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PAUL DUKE: Good evening .... with reporters Charles McDowell of the Richmond Times Dispatch, Lee May of the Los Angeles Times, and Hedrick Smith of the New York Times.

DUKE: And something special -- a story of the plot to kill the pope, and how the United States is conspiring to cover up the plot. This from Claire Sterling, a free-lance journalist stationed in Rome.

DUKE: Let's pay, let's pay attention now to Claire Sterling who is a renowned American journalist who has lived abroad for many years and is a recognized authority on terrorism. Claire, among other things, you have advanced the theory that there is no question that there was a plot to kill the pope three years ago, that there is no question there was a Bulgarian connection, that through that there was a Soviet involvement, and now you're saying that there's a massive cover-up on the part of American intelligence authorities and other Western democracies. I think, first of all, we'd like to ask you basically what, what do we know about the plot against the pope?

STERLING: Well, we know that this hit man, this Turkish hit man, had a pure right-wing terrorist image, part of it authentic, part of it cultivated, and that he was taken out of prison for where he was on trial for another murder to which he had confessed in Turkey. He was taken out of prison by right-wingers who happen to also work for a Turkish arms mafia based in Sofia, sponsored by, controlled by, and supervised by the Bulgarian secret services. This is documented knowledge: that the Turkish mafia operating out of Sofia brought him to Sofia, got his false passport, supplied him with money, sent him on his way to Rome, using then in Europe other right-wing gray wolf terrorists operating in Europe, who happened also to be couriers working for the Turkish mafia pushing heroin. So that they were employees of the Turkish mafia which was, in turn, controlled, still is controlled by--and this is documented, I repeat--by the Bulgarian secret service, so that we also know the plot is established. I mean, it is impossible that this man was a loner. Not only impossible, it's been ruled out by Italian courts. He was not a loner. He was not crazy. He was perfectly sane. He was a professional hit man. This man, this was decided at the beginning by the Italian courts.

DUKE: So it was all carefully planned to kill the pope? So if we know all this, why hasn't it been broadcast all over the world?

STERLING: Well, I ask you, you know, but it's not just the pope. This is, this is the culmination of many years of, of a cult of disbelief for one thing on the part liberals in the West who cannot bring themselves to believe that the Soviet Union is capable of at least as black deeds as the United States. And this in turn has been encouraged by the kind of word that's been handed out to the press by members of the U.S. intelligence community primarily, although it's true of all the West, who have, who have been denying the Bulgarian connection because, I think, they... First of all, the president wanted to have a summit meeting with, with Andropov, who was head of the KGB when this hit was ordered and is now the head of the Soviet Union, and because the whole theory of detente is, if you say out loud what you know about the underside of Soviet policy, you destroy or threaten detente or what is left of it. And therefore, silence, as far as the public is concerned, the public should not know, must not know.

MCDOWELL: Claire, Ronald Reagan is president of the United States; a man named Bill Casey is head of the CIA--the most conservative anti-Soviet political figures we've

2.

had in this country in many years. I think you're asking us to accept that they are part of a conspiracy to cover up the conspiracy to get the pope and that they're doing that out of the motive of protecting the Soviet Union from embarrassment and shame?

STERLING: That is what I am saying. And one indication of it that you could say that up until, let us say, last May 28th, what was being leaked to the most important newspapers and the media in this country about there being no Bulgarian connection, could have been a series of individual opinions expressed by variously unidentified but authoritative sources close to the CIA or of experts familiar with the CIA's views and so on. But on May 28th in the Los Angeles Times, there was a very long interview granted by several experts of this character who said that William Casey, director of the CIA, and William Clark, the president's national security adviser at the time, had lost all belief in the Bulgarian connection, no longer believed that there was a Bulgarian connection. Now, of course, these were leaks from unidentified sources. But there has never since then been a counter-leak from other unidentified but qualified sources to say that that was not really a reflection of Bill Casey's opinion. Well, I think the record stands on itself. I mean, I don't, I know that the direction of the CIA is in no position to confirm or deny officially any kind of talk like that, but if somebody can plant the story that he doesn't believe in the Bulgarian connection and somebody else can say that isn't true, he really does. And nobody has said that.

SMITH: Claire, I'm reminded of a speech that Ronald Reagan made in Florida last March in which he said the Soviet Union, we face the designs of an evil empire. The phrase was an evil empire, which seemed to me that if there were any single episode that he could cite, if he believed it were true, would be a Soviet-ordered plot run by the Bulgarian secret service and manned by the Turkish mafia to knock off the pope. Why, during that period, which was, after all, not a period where the president was even half tempted to, to push the idea of no detente but even a kind rhetoric towards the Soviets, why would that not have been a time when he would have even dropped in an allusion? I don't mean a direct accusation, but even an allusion?

STERLING: An allusion? There has been no allusion either from the president or from any incumbent member of his administration indicating a belief in the Bulgarian connection. I don't understand all the reasons why, but I can, I can certainly prove that the attitude has been one of refusing to face the evidence because the evidence of the Bulgarian connection has been increasingly clear since the investigating judge in this case, Judge \*Martella, arrested one Bulgarian who was the deputy director of the Bulgarian Airlines, who is still in prison despite reports to the contrary in the American press, under house arrest, but he has not been released on provisional liberty, and he is going to face trial without question. And the judge also ordered the arrest of two other Bulgarian diplomats from the embassy in Rome who had by that time escaped to Sofia. And all the evidence that he has collected corroborating the confession of the hit man Agca himself has been--we don't know the total nature of the evidence, by law we're not allowed to be told that till he reports on his case--but the Italian courts have four times denied Bulgarian Embassy lawyers' requests for the provisional liberation of \*Serge Antonov on the grounds that the evidence against him is so strong as to, to warrant his continuing detention.

DUKE: We have just about 15 seconds. What happens now? Is the truth as you see it going to be suppressed?

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3.

STERLING: Well, it's going to be very hard to suppress after around the first of February because the attorney general of Italy is going to give his report recommending for or against trial, including Serge Antonov, and it is my moral certainty that he will recommend trial.

DUKE: Well, we'd like to stage our own plot against the march of time, but we can never pull it off. Thanks very much for being with us tonight, Claire, Claire Sterling.

**EXCERPTED**